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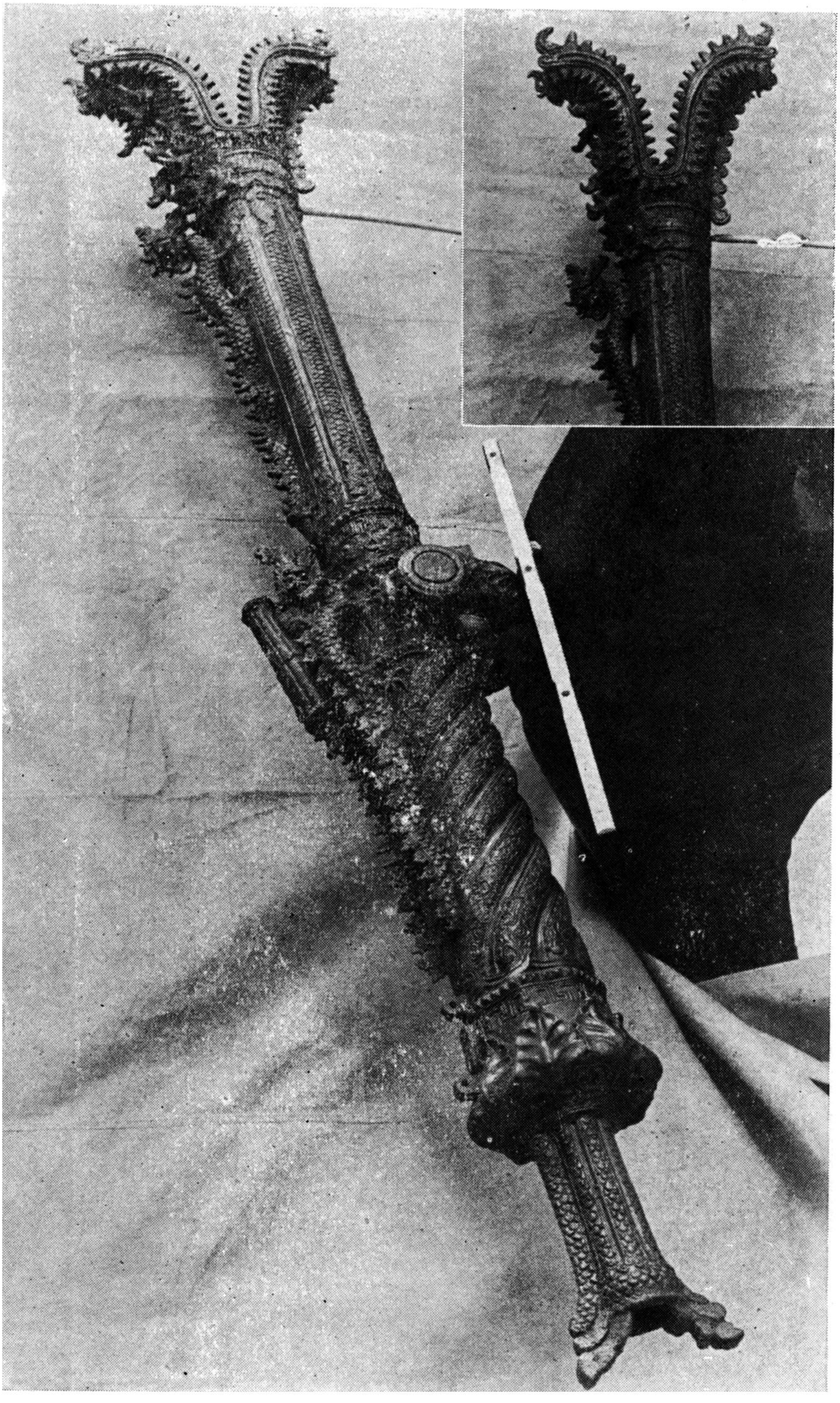
PLATE 1



G. C. WOOLLEY—A Malay Cannon.

Malay Cannon

By G. C. WOOLLEY

Although gunpowder was known, apparently, to the Chinese at least several centuries before Christ it was not till long afterwards—and then in the West, to which the knowledge of it may have been carried by Arab traders—that it began to be used as a propelling agent for missiles in war or even for other war purposes. In the 7th Cent. A.D. it was used as an incendiary called "Greek Fire", and in the 12th Century it was used for artillery in Spain in some of the wars between the Spaniards and the Moors. In 1327 our Edward III used artillery in his Scotch wars, and there were cannon at Crecy in 1346. Most of the material used in England was imported, and manufacture there began in Queen Elizabeth's time. In 1477 brass cannon were being cast in Prussia, and in the latter part of the 15th Century iron was used.

The bearing of all this on our present subject is that no Malay cannon are likely to be of any extreme antiquity, and the knowledge of their use and manufacture could have come either from China or from the West, and probably not much earlier than the 15th Century A.D.

As soon as cannon came into such general use that they were carried by ships as well as used on land for fortifications, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and English ships, merchantmen as well as ships of war, would have brought them to the Far East, and war and piracy would soon distribute specimens over a large area, and wherever there was a knowledge of metal-working there would be an attempt to produce them locally.

Several places in Malaya acquired a special reputation for turning out good cannon, amongst the most important being Brunei, Palembang, Atcheh, Menangkabau, and Trengganu. Dr. Linehan, *History of Pahang*, p. 50, states that good cannon were being made in Pahang in 1600 A.D., and in his paper on *Discoveries on the Tembeling,* p. 68, he records the discovery of a mould for casting cannon, which he dates at about the 14th—15th century. The methods followed, and the patterns and ornamentations adopted, were not necessarily the same in all of these: in Brunei, Chinese influence and practice may well have been paramount, owing to old trading and business relations with China: in Palembang and Atcheh the chief external influence would be Arab, in Java perhaps Hindu. Gardner quotes Marsden's *History of Sumatra* where he mentions "accounts in old writers of great foundries of cannon in

Atcheh": Marsden also (2nd Ed. 1784, p. 275) says "How early they began to cast cannon I cannot take upon me to say: the first Portuguese histories mention their using them." St. John, *Life in the Forests of the Far East* Vol. 2, p. 298, says that in Brunei the metal for the guns was obtained from selected Chinese brass 'cash'—also evidence of Chinese influence. Krieger thinks that both guns and powder came, not from China, but from Arabia, with Islam: Saleeby states that the Sulus had firearms and 'lantaka's (cannon) *before* the Spaniards came. Hamilton, in his *New Account of the E. Indies* mentions seeing 'culverins' in a fort in Atcheh in 1702, but nowhere records anything about their manufacture or includes them as part of the 'produce' of any of the countries he visited. Chinese traders and workmen were to be found all over the Malay Archipelago, so it would not be surprising if they had brought with them a knowledge of metal-casting and introduced in a greater or less degree Chinese methods and Chinese decoration in the work they produced. Arab trade and influence in the Western part of Malaya was not inferior to that of the Chinese.

The type of cannon usually produced would naturally be that best suited to local conditions. There are clear instances of a primitive form—a barrel of wood or bamboo or a hollowed palm bound with rings of metal, but these soon gave place to the more elaborate and efficient castings. The walls of Malay forts and the bulwarks of the small pirate boats would call for small, light, and easily managed guns, not the big calibre type on solid or wheeled carriages suitable for European fortifications or the deck of an East Indiaman. The pivot or swivel gun was ideal for Malay purposes. In form, it followed the European Culverin, the lighter forms of which gave rise to the arquebus with its single or tripod rest: the U-shaped upper part of the swivel held the trunnions of the gun, and the pointed foot would fit, like a rowlock, into any socket in the bulwarks of a boat or in the walls or embrasures of a fort. At the breech end was a hollow tube, perhaps 6 inches long, not the round knob usually seen on European guns, and into this could be fitted a wooden spike or handle for turning or elevating or depressing the muzzle, an efficient aiming device only improved upon by the elevating screw of a modern machine gun, which still retains the pointed pivot though adding a clamp to it. A long metal handle, as part of the gun itself, is occasionally seen, but was evidently too awkward and clumsy to command general approval. The European type of knob breech end is also occasionally found, but very often the weapon is one of European origin. Eccentricities naturally occur, such as a double-barrelled cannon cast in one piece, a bell-mouthed blunderbuss variety, and the highly ornamented guns—of Brunei make, I believe—with muzzles like wide open crocodile or dragon jaws. The guns are often decorated with patterns like those on other brass ware, gongs or jars, and it is not uncommon to find a specimen with part if not all of the barrel with a twisted fluted pattern. The lugs of the guns are often small dragons or dolphins. Whether the place of manufacture can be deduced with certainty from the type of decoration is still doubtful: the dragon type certainly suggests Brunei with its traditions of Chinese workmen. In some cases the swivel has plain holes into which the gun's trunnions fit, and in others it has closed cup-shaped ends, usually decorated with a floreated leaf or rosette pattern; it has been suggested that this difference may indicate the place of origin, but I have not been able to obtain any positive evidence.

Cannon, apart from use in war, had in Borneo at least a value as currency. The ordinary gun, with normal decoration, was valued at approximately $25—$30 a pikul. Fines for the more serious offences would be expressed as 'so many pikuls', and one or more cannon to make up the weight specified would be paid. Cannon also formed a regular item in 'Brian' (Dowry). Differences in workmanship, apart from exceptional cases, would not alter to any large extent the intrinsic value of the gun as so much metal, and this value would not fluctuate much, so cannon made a fairly stable currency. A cannon was not difficult to store, stood up on end and lashed to a house post, as they can be seen to this day; it would not deteriorate by rust, whereas buffaloes or cattle might die instead of multiplying, and in case of a raid or on feast days when a loud noise was called for, it might even be positively useful. In quite recent years however many cannon have been sold as old metal or melted down to provide material for the smaller and less cumbrous gongs other brass-ware.

Plate 1 gives two views of a Brunei cannon which before the war was in Government House, Sandakan, and was the property of the North Borneo Government. It has now disappeared, and has not yet been traced, possibly the Japanese had it melted down as 'scrap'.

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